

‘T’ IS FOR ...

AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE ON CONSCIENCE

MORALIZED TIME LINE:

Fourteen hundred and forty years ago teachings derived from the Qur’an established a Way of Life modeled by the Prophet Muhammad. This Way of Life is known as Islam.

CONSCIENCE RELEVANT WORKS:

There has been extensive use of the modern Arabic word *damir* for the English word *conscience*. An invitation is made to discernment of intentional use of the word *damir* in this way, by some authors, to emphasize interfaith experience and establish a uniting linguistic bond between people of different religious belongings. After due consideration of *damir*, we proceed to a fully Islamic perspective on conscience by examining material from four sources: the Qur’an, Traditions of the Prophet and Islamic scholarship past and present. Highlighted in the latter canon are writings from giants of antiquity such as Ibn al-‘Arabi and al-Ghazali. Ghazali’s *Anatomy of the Soul* also known as ‘the family of internal aspects’ will be seen as the foundation of Islamic moral psychology and psychopathology. Specific intersections of Islamic aspects of conscience with the several domains of conscience as explicated by the Indiana University Conscience Project can be discerned while preserving the integrity of their divergences.

Modern Arabic Usage of *al-Damir* for *Conscience*: From English, the word *conscience* translates into modern Arabic as *al-damir*. The extensive use of *damir* by some authors may reflect their intention to find a uniting linguistic bond between people of different religious belongings. The practice invites certain questions: What were the meanings of *damir* in classical Arabic? How and when did the word acquire the modern meaning of moral conscience? To what extent can a fuller Islamic understanding of conscience rely on sole use of this word *damir*? In his article *Conscience in Arabic and the semantic history of damir*, Oddbjorn Leirvik (2009) traces *damir* in religious and philosophical works. The religious works include Arabic bibles, from early medieval manuscripts to modern printed versions, and his purpose is to elucidate how *al-damir* became the preferred term for rendering the Greek *syneidesis* and its cognate words in Syriac, Coptic and Latin. Muslim philosophers from the classical period used *damir* with reference to heartfelt relations or inner thoughts, but with no apparent mystic or moral connotations. For example, as cited by Leirvik (2009, p.163), Kraemer treats of a text originating from the philosophical circle of Abu Sulayman al-Sijistani (d. 985), to whom we find the following statement attributed:

If the heart (*damir*) of one friend is open to another, the truth glows between them, the good enfolds and each becomes a mainstay to his companion, a helpmate in his endeavor and a potent factor in his attaining his wish. There is nothing surprising in this: souls ignite one another, tongues exchange confidences; and the mysteries of this human being, a microcosm in this macrocosm, abound and spread.

Secular and Interfaith Considerations: In medieval and modern Bible Arabic, as well, Leirvik finds that the emergence of *damir* as the privileged word for *conscience* in modern Arabic, owes to Christian Arabic developments in the nineteenth century. Writing in the 1950s and 60s, three

John Sullivan & Matthew R. Galvin. (2021). ‘T’ is for ... an Islamic perspective on conscience. In Gaffney, M.M. & Galvin, M.R., eds. *An Encyclopedia of Conscience*. IU Conscience Project. Accessible from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1805/27074>.

Muslim intellectuals, Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad, Kamil Husayn and Khalid Muhammad Khalid put the notion of *damir* at the center of their works about Islamic ethics, moral philosophy and the relation between Muhammad and Christ. (Leirvik, 2009). Also cited by Leirvik in the same work is the Christian Arab, Jamal Saliba, who, in 1971, compiled a philosophical dictionary which concentrates on Arabic to French translations. In his dictionary, Saliba translates *su ur* as *conscience psychologique* and *damir* as *conscience morale*. Saliba defines *damir* as *a disposition of the soul* to distinguish between good and bad deeds accompanied by the faculty to issue immediate moral judgments on the value of individual actions. Saliba cites Rousseau in order to show that conscience—as a ‘divine instinct’—can also be conceived as capable of issuing moral judgments in advance; functioning both as a guide and a restraint. Leirvik’s Arabic semantic journey comports in many ways with considerations of conscience language in a recent review by the Indiana University Conscience Project (IUCP) In that review, it is noted that medieval Christian terms *synteresis* from Greek, is different from *syneidesis* mentioned above which is translated as *conscientia* in Latin. There are two important aspects of conscience in ordinary language today: the more intuitive, implicit and tacit aspect echoing *synteresis* (*synderesis* in modern English dictionaries) and the more self-aware, reflective, deliberative, and effortful aspect echoing *conscientia* (Galvin, Hulvershorn & Gaffney, 2019). More specific intersections of secular conscience theory with the Islamic concept will be addressed next.

Islamic Foundations: In what follows, ‘conscience’ without any quotation marks will refer to conscience as explicated and interrogated in the conscience theory evolved from the empirical studies of the IUCP. Except when a translation of the modern Arabic *al-damir* has been intended, the word “conscience” will be set in quotation marks to represent a global interpretation from the four Islamic sources. The four sources that inform Muslims about the concept of “conscience” are:

- **The Qur’an** believed to be the direct Word of the Creator which came to the Prophet Muhammad over a course of 23 years. The conduit for this Revelation was the Angel Gabriel.¹
- **The Hadith** is a collection of traditions containing sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.²
- **The Sunnah**, lit. habitual practice, is the body of traditional social and legal custom and practice of the Islamic community.
- **Research** of Qur’an, Hadith and Sunnah and subsequent writings of Muslim scholars.

Among the Muslim scholars of antiquity, Al-Ghazali, whose full name was Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058 to 1111 CE) was considered one of the most prominent and influential philosophers, theologians, jurists and mystics of Islam. He was of Persian origin. Islamic tradition considers him to be a *Mujaddid*, a Renewer of the Faith who, according to the Prophetic Hadith, appears once every century to restore the faith of the *Ummah*: Islamic community (Smith, 2000, p. 36). Al-Ghazali’s works were so highly acclaimed by his contemporaries, he was awarded the honorific title *Hujjat al-Islam*: ‘Proof of Islam’

Al Ghazali modeled a family of internal *aspects*³ of which there are four, all derived from the Qur’an (IIP, 2018 p. 33).³ The distinctions made by al-Ghazali among these four aspects are mostly for our benefit in understanding the structure, function and condition, that is to say, the inner workings of the human soul. However, it should be kept in mind that they are aspects of an integrated functioning whole in a way conceptually akin to the idea of the interdependent domains of conscience operating in conscience functioning.

In Islam, then, it may be said simply that “conscience” is to be understood as part of “the family of internal aspects” of the human being, each aspect constitutive of the anatomy and dynamics of the soul. However, if we are to attain a fuller understanding of the Islamic concept, several other Arabic words must be drawn from the vast literature on the subject spanning over fourteen centuries.

Complicating matters somewhat for us, early Muslim scholars used *self*, *soul* and *nafs* interchangeably when they referred to this “family of internal aspects” as *one integrated whole*. The less confusing term preferred today is **ittihaad**, rendered in English as “unity of being,” implicating that all four aspects work in concert with one another to achieve truly holistic health. While preserving an Islamic context, taking into account the distortions of the mirrors of both secular and interfaith consilience, ittihaad may be best aligned in conscience theory with the domain of **conceptualization of conscience** and the value intrinsic to it: *meaning making*. This conscience domain is understood to be an anchor for all the others (Stilwell et al., 1991). The good news is that the interconnectivity and overlapping of the domains of conscience in conscience theory afford a genuine opportunity to attempt rough alignments (but not one-to-one correspondences) of relevant Islamic terms applicable to the “family of internal aspects”, on the one hand, with conscience theory language, on the other.

Before making the attempt at that rough alignment, however, we will lodge the four aspects securely in their scriptural home, Qur’an:

- 1) **Nafs** (Self)...By the soul (nafs) and by Him who made it perfect and then inspired it to understand what is wrong and what is right for it. **Truly is successful the one who profits his soul (nafs) (Qur’an 91: 7-9).**
- 2) **Qalb** (Essence, “heart of hearts”) ...**Indeed in that is a reminder for whoever has a heart or who listens while he is present in mind (Qur’an 50:37)**
- 3) **`Aql** (Cognitions, reason, intellect) ...**Surely the worst of beasts in God’s sight are those that are deaf and dumb and do not reason (Qur’an 8:22).**
- 4) **Ruh** (Spirit, life force) ... **And they ask you, O Muhammad, about the soul. Say, the soul is of the affair of my Lord. And man has not been given of knowledge except a little” (Qur’an 17:85).**

ISLAMIC ASPECTS OF THE SOUL AND DOMAINS OF CONSCIENCE:

NAFS.

The Arabic word *nafs* is sometimes translated as *self* in English. Nafs is not considered to be bad in and of itself and can be trained to serve the whole integrated Self (ITT, 2018, p. 44). Although the nafs is a single entity, its state may change. The *developmental stage* of one’s nafs is also one’s *Hal* or state. The three developmental stages of the nafs are typically presented in the following order:

1. **An-Nafs-Al-Ammarah** – (commanding self; 12:53)
2. **An-Nafs Al-Lawwamah** – (reproaching self; 75:2)
3. **An-Nafs-Al-Mut’mainnah** – (contented self; 89:27)

A different presentation of the developmental stages or expressions of the nafs using different nomenclature and descriptions may be found in Sullivan (2012).

An-Nafs-Al-Ammarah is the self that commands to wrong action. In the Qur'an we learn this developmental stage of self is 'prone to evil'. It does not say we *are* evil, rather this aspect of self is prone to wrong action. In the chapter of the Qur'an named for him the Prophet Joseph as he addresses Pharaoh:

I do not seek to acquit myself; for surely one's self (nafs/soul) prompts one to evil except him to whom my Lord may show mercy." (Qur'an 12:53).

Joseph is referring to the developmental stage of the nafs/self) that is 'prone to evil'.

There is no concept of 'original sin' in Islam's view of human nature or *fitrah*. Human beings are not born in sin, but instead are forgetful creatures in need of remembrance. As to the question:

'What do men and women need to remember?' the answer is found in 7:172 of the Qur'an.

And mention when your Lord took from the children of Adam—from their loins—their descendants and made them testify of themselves, saying to them, "Am I not your Rabb (Sustainer)?" they said, "Yes, we have testified." This lest you should say on the day of Resurrection, "Indeed, we were of this unaware." (Qur'an 7:172)

This verse tells of the gathering of all souls (that is of all of us) to the Creator where we testified that our Sustainer was One. A primary function of Prophets and Revelation throughout history is to *remind* us of the commitment we made during the pretemporal phase of our existence. The last part of this verse says: **This lest you should say on the day of Resurrection, 'Indeed, we were of this unaware'** implicates echoes stored in our unconscious (*sirr*) accountably accessible to us by way of Revelation.

Ibn Al-'Arabi comments on the interaction between souls (you and I) and their Sustainer (Rabb) referred to in this verse and how it relates to our *disposition*:

One's disposition is related to the intensity of the affirmation (Yea, we do testify!) with which the individual answered the question posed by the Creator in this pre-eternity gathering: "Am I not your Lord (Rabb, Sustainer)?"

It is not surprising, therefore, that Saliba defines *damir* as "a *disposition* of the soul to distinguish between good and bad deeds."

In conscience theory, especially in the conscience sensitive **moral volitional** task of **demoralization and harm prevention planning**, we find the dispositional language adopted from Pierre Janet: "tendency to harm" (Ellenberger, 1970). In conscience theory, tendencies to harm are activated by demoralization but have not yet issued into observable harmful behavior. Like demoralization itself, tendencies to harm can be made explicit and personalized. Only then can they occasion effortful restoration or even transformation via 'turnarounds' towards personal flourishing and away from one's personal trajectory towards harm. (IUCP, 2011)

An-Nafs Al-Lawwamah translates as: "The Blaming Self" or the "Self-Critic". The "Self-Critic" is also referred to as *al-waidhu* (the Warner). Al-waidhu serves as a moral compass within the Blaming Self. According to Keshavarzi and Khan, this self has the function of attempting to manage the hedonistic lower self, An-Nafs Al-Ammarah bi-su'. (ITP, 2018, pp. 194-95). The Self-Critic is conscious of its own imperfections. Hasan al-Basri said:

You always see (the one dominated by An-Nafs Al-Lawwamah) blaming himself and saying things like, "Did I want this?" "Why did I do that?" or "Was this better than that?"

Umar ibn Al-Khattab, the Second Caliph in Islam said:

Hold yourself accountable before you are held accountable and weigh your deeds before they are weighed for you.

This aspect assists us in following Umar's warning. The Fourth Caliph in Islam, Ali ibn Abi Talib said:

The person who does not have the ability within his own soul to advise and warn himself from keeping away from bad things, will never receive benefit from another who tries to give him advice and counsel him on these issues.

An-Nafs Al-Lawwamah brings us to the manifestation of the Self most aligned with the psychoanalytic construct of the punitive superego, but in the context of Islamic meaning-making it invokes theistic natural law.

Much the same caveats apply to conscience theory. This aspect, "functioning both as a guide and a restraint", would most closely align with functional interactions of the conscience domain of **moral valuation**, particularly the sub-domain that is called 'authority-derived' moral valuation: 'ought's' and 'ought not's' legislated by external authority figures (Stilwell et al., 1996). In their responses to the Stilwell Conscience Interview (Stilwell, 1994) persons of faith do, in fact, include among their moral mandates, commandments attributed to the divine. Some identify the divine pre-eminently among their principal moral attachment figures. Theistic natural law goes further and has it that there is always already moral nature, not legislated, but divinely embedded in our human nature at creation.

In conscience theory, explicit inquiries are made into what might be called *the laws of nature* that govern our biological capacity for moralization; but conscience theory nonetheless remains mute on the status of *natural law*, whether in theistic or more modern, secular forms. Islam is not at all mute on the subject of natural law. In Islam, the meaningful context of spirituality is never left in abeyance.

In Islamic psychology and the Islamically Integrated Psychotherapy (ITT, 2018) derived from it, the distinction between laws of nature and divinely embedded natural law collapses. There are two points to keep in mind about what is presented in any Islamic writing that relates information about occurrences in another realm such as the "interaction" between souls (you and I) and the Creator:

First, the source is the final Revelation, which is the Qur'an.

Second, humans are limited by our four-dimensional language with its four-dimensional concepts.

Since the Qur'an came in the human language of Arabic, the language of the Prophet's people, explanations in Revelation are *approximations*. Islam teaches that Revelation always came to Prophets in the language of their people. So, for example, Revelation came to Jesus, son of Mary, in Aramaic.

Conscience theory limits its scope to the realm of psychology as a 'science' (writ in lower case) in what some might call the 'western' mode in which the Science (writ with a capital) of antiquity was gradually pared down and contradistinguished from magic, theology and philosophy. In the community of sciences (writ in lower case), conscience theory observes scientific method and its strict criteria of testable hypotheses corrigible in the light of further evidence established by empirical validation. However, at the bevels of belief and unbelief, those human beings who work in this field of science may yet find themselves gazing beyond its

boundaries to a 'there'. It is true they cannot, from any vantage point within the field of science in which they toil, discern 'any way to get there from here'. However, as human beings who resist reduction of their humanity, they may be in ready agreement that perspectives can and must be switched from the scientific to the theological, philosophical or other contexts of meaning in order to determine just how the capacity for moralized nature in the field *ought* to be conserved and nurtured. Those in the scientific field of conscience theory may indeed find their gaze returned by others (or even by themselves) standing in another field, but at a distance.

In conscience theory the impetus of 'oughtness' or 'ought-not-ness' underlying moral mandates is located in the domain of **moralized attachment**. The *security-empathy-oughtness link* that is formed there is essential to the intergenerational transmission of values (Stilwell et al. 1997).

It being understood that in Islam the Creator is the principle- nay- ultimate- moral attachment figure, we see An-Nafs Al-Lawwamah at multiple intersections: with the domain of **moralized attachment** and the domain of **moral emotional responsiveness** (Stilwell et al., 1994) as well, in which the moral emotional barometer registers moral distress over contemplated or enacted transgression and elicits a 'righting *reflex*' or perhaps a more reflective 'righting *response*' in the domain of **moral volition** (Stilwell et al., 1998).

An-Nafs Al-Mut`mainnah is the self at peace, the contented self. This is the balanced self in that the person dominated by this self does not rejoice at gains or despair at afflictions. This person understands that both gains and afflictions in life were created long before they manifest in this realm as he or she experiences his or her life; even before he or she was created.

This *Hal* or stage of *naf* perhaps best aligns in conscience theory with the apotheosis of ongoing developmental processes in the domain of **moral emotional responsiveness** as a person is pushed and pulled by the value intrinsic to that domain: *equanimity, harmony or balance*.

Aql.

This is the aspect of cognition, reason and intellect.

In conscience theory, the cognitive realm, once moralized in human development, is the seat of moral judgment and reasoning. Here we have, *prima facie*, an alignment with the conscience domains **conceptualization of conscience** and **moral valuation** (Stilwell, et al., 1996).

Qalb

There is a propensity to translate the Arabic word *qalb* as 'heart'. The qalb is *not* the organ we call the heart. A more accurate translation is "essence" or "core".

The qalb is an instrument which has been given the capability of perceiving the Divine Attributes of the Creator revealed in the Qur'an. Furthermore, it is the operating agency which transforms one's spiritual potential into actuality. Fundamentally, it represents that capacity or faculty which enables a person to:

1. Know and understand the reality of things.
2. Make evaluative judgments.
3. Sift right from wrong.

Reference to this dynamic is found in the following saying (Hadith) of the Prophet Muhammad:

“I came to the Messenger of Allah and he said, “You have come to ask about righteousness.’ I said, ‘Yes.’ He said, ‘Consult your qalb. Righteousness is that about which the soul feels at ease and the qalb feels tranquil. And wrongdoing is that which wavers in the soul and causes uneasiness in the breast, even though people have repeatedly given their legal opinion in its favor.” -- Ahmed bin Hambal and Al-Darimi, with a good chain of authorities (isnad).⁴

As we shall see further on, one cannot take advantage of this dynamic as a source of guidance if the aspects under discussion are corrupted or out of balance. However, if an individual has done the work to maintain balance among these domains (nafs, aql, qalb and ruh) and has guarded against their corruption, the Prophet Muhammad said:

“Even if others give contrary opinions or reassurances of the correctness of their opinions over and over and even if they badger you, the uneasy sensation you are experiencing may continue. This is an indication of what your choice should be. The fact that others keep pushing you [peer pressure] and your soul *still* vacillates, is proof that this is something wrong. Even if the thing you were considering turns out to be permissible.”

In other words, it is best to *follow your qalb* working in concert with An-Nafs-Al-Lawwamah when struggling in a gray area. From the Islamic psychological perspective reliance on “information” or “communication” from the qalb and An-Nafs-Al-Lawwamah is important. The dynamic interaction is the source of guidance and moral authority for the individual and is to be complemented and refined by the wisdom of Divine Revelation. Reliance on advice and counsel in the Qur’an is, put simply, required. The following ayah (verse) explains why this is so:

You may dislike something although it is good for you or like something although it is bad for you. God knows and you know not. (Qur’an 2:216).

What the Prophet says remains true in that you may not have access to advice from Revelation or you may have forgotten some advice pertinent to a particular situation or choice you need to make.

It is fascinating what Ali ibn Talib, the fourth caliph of Islam (656 to 661 CE) observed about the qalb centuries ago:

I am amazed at the Qalb of man: It possess the substance of wisdom AS WELL AS the opposites contrary to it. For:

If *hope* arises in it, it is brought low by *covetousness*.

If *covetousness* is aroused in it, *greed* destroys it.

If *despair* possess it, *self-piety* kills it.

If it is seized by *anger*, this is intensified by *rage*.

If it is blessed with *contentment*, then it *forgets to be careful*.

If it is filled with *fear*, then it becomes *preoccupied with being cautious*.

If it feels *secure*, then it is overwhelmed by vain hopes.

If it is *given wealth*, then its independence makes it *extravagant*.

If *want* strikes it, then it is smitten by *anxiety*.

If it is weakened by *hunger*, then it gives way to *exhaustion*.

If it goes too far in *satisfying its appetites*, then its inner becomes *clogged up*.

Ruh

Life force or spirit: the ruh is the higher self, that yearns for a connection with and a return to its Source. Without *this* connection we hear people lament: “There’s a hole inside I can’t seem to fill.” However, here we must acknowledge that we have absolutely exceeded the boundaries of conscience theory and have adopted a spiritual perspective. That said, within the contextual meaning of Islam we might imbue the conscience domains of moral attachment and moral volition with spiritual import; that is: of a motivational longing for connection to the Creator.

O tranquil soul! Return to your Lord, pleased and well-pleasing. Enter among my servants. Enter among My Paradise. (Qur’an 89:27-30)

ENDNOTES

1 One of the *Six Articles of Faith* in Islam is belief in Angels. It is believed that the Angel Gabriel has served as the conduit for Revelation to Abraham, David, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. We seem to accept that we can see inwardly only so far and then we rely on microscopes. We can see outwardly only so far and then we rely on telescopes. We can only be heard so far and then we rely on microphones. Yet, we find it difficult to accept that we know only so much and then must rely on Revelation to learn about life after death, Hell, Angels or Paradise. Another example of things that would be totally beyond our comprehension were it not Revelation is *barzakh*—a realm between this world and the Hereafter. Our experience in this realm is for an appointed term that beginning when the soul leaves the body at what we call “death” and ending upon our resurrection for participation in the Day of Accountability. We are given a place ‘between sweet and salt water’:

He has made the two seas to flow freely so that they meet together: Between them is a barrier (*barzakh*) which they cannot pass. (Qur’an 55:19-20)

Barzakh is given extensive treatment by Ibn al-‘Arabi, who was honored with the title “Sheikh of Sheikhs” (Bashir, 2004)

2 *Hadith* – A collection of traditions containing sayings of the Prophet Muhammad which, with accounts of his daily practice (the Sunna), constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Qur’an.

3. *Internal aspects* is the author JS’ phrase. Different terms are used by those who systematized the **ISLAMICALLY INTEGRATED PSYCHOTHERAPY** (ITP) model. Pioneering work in this field is being done at the **Khalil Center** in Chicago, Illinois—a psychological and spiritual wellness center—where this model is researched and taught to Muslim therapists: <https://khalilcenter.com/> ITP includes *Ihsaas* or emotions as another distinct aspect, though previously listed under *ruh*, it is warranted as an addition to the original Ghazalian conceptualization of the previously listed family of aspects because of the significant advancements in emotion theory (ITP, 2018, p.179)

4. *Isnad* means “chain of transmitters” referring to those who have been authenticated to pass on the sayings of the Prophet Muhammed. The reliability of these sayings as well as the character of those who passed on this information is verified using an extremely meticulous methodology called “Hadith Science”. For an explanation of this methodology go to this link: <https://www.islamic-awareness.org/hadith/ulum/hadsciences.html>.

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JS/mrg

About this Work

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Since 2001, our Conscience Project meetings have regularly included lively discussions and applications of the conceptual framework of conscience theory - stages, domains and bedrock/intrinsic values – to the ideas we are studying in ethics, neuroscience, education, philosophy, psychology and theology. Early on, Dr. Barbara Stilwell compiled an alphabetical list of authors who may or may not have been explicit about conscience, but who deeply influenced our theory of conscience as it evolved, and recently, we have begun to apply the same conscience-sensitive approaches to character/author analyses in the histories, biographies, and other literature, fact and fiction, we are reading. We are excited to see how these unique conscience-sensitive approaches can enrich our own writing and teaching in humanistic medicine, general humanities, and specifically, moral education. The brief entries in this **Encyclopedia of Conscience** are not meant to be full biographies, but rather to provide an imaginative sketch of the form and function of each subject's conscience. We welcome ideas and additions.



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